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A Relevant Theology: Dedication of Fuerbringer Hall at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis: John 8:31-32, 1962

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Mt. Airy

A RELEVANT THEOLOGY

Sermon for the Dedication of Fuerbringer Hall (Library)

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, September 30, 1962

on John 8: 31. 32

Otto Paul Kretzmann

No graduate of Concordia Seminary can stand in this place on this occasion without giving way at least for the moment to blessed memories. Here at Concordia Seminary many of us were taught the theology of the Cross. Here some of us learned a little of the critical reverence which was one of the great marks of a man whose name is memorialized today by the new library. Through all these intervening years we have seen the essential greatness of the seminary increasingly reflected in its physical facilities. And what is infinitely more important, these quiet halls and quadrangles are now moving ever closer to the agonies of modern man. So we alumni come to this moment with pride and joy.

Surely I do not need to underscore the fact this afternoon that the world to which our seminary must speak is far different from the world which we saw from the old building on South Jefferson forty years ago. True, those who are older this afternoon will remember the shadows on the horizon. Some of the men who were at the seminary at that time had returned from the last war to which St. Augustine was still relevant. The world was nothing like the world this afternoon in the year of our Lord 1962.

As our theologians know, the adjectives most frequently applied to this world of 1962 are "post-Christian" and "post-modern." Both of them reflect the

mood of a day that is gone, telling us that we are really children of the after-glow, that this library which we dedicate today is not a library but a museum, that the principle of historical exhaustion has come true again and funeral choirs are chanting once more. The post-Christian man is the man for whom God is absent and silent and dead. The post-modern man is the emerging successor of the modern man whose life span was from the Renaissance to Karl Marx. When you really come down to it they merge into one, the man about whom Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote about thirty years ago, "Man has never quite been the same since God died. He doesn't say very much but he laughs much louder than he used to. He can't bear to sit still and he can't bear to be alone. He gets along all right as long as it is day, but when night comes and the darkness falls over him, then he goes out and cries over the grave of God. He wants to be dead since God is dead and he wants to be nothing since life is nothing."

Now you may say, "What has all this to do with the dedication of a theological library?" I am sure the answer is clear to all of us. Out of these books must come the knowledge and the wisdom and the understanding which will enable thousands of servants of the church to speak to this kind of man and this kind of world with relevance and with power. Out of the reading of the words in the library there will come, I would hope and pray, a great obedience to the Word, both written and incarnate, so that for generations to come there will be men here who will continue in that Word, who will live in it and love it, so that by that life and by that love they will come, by the miracle and mercy of God, to know the truth, to be ambassadors of the truth, heralds of the light and keepers of the lamps by which post-Christian man and post-modern man too must again find his way between the eternities.

Here now comes something strange and unexpected. For all knowledge that will come out of the library and the studies conducted there, there is something very

curious in our text. Our Lord say, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

Have you ever noted the astonishing and stunning quality of that last word? "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you"--now what word would we expect to use? We might say "the truth shall make you good, faithful, obedient, even holy." But "free" is the word! You can almost feel and see the startling and heavenly clarity with which our Lord looked forward through all the years, also to our post-modern world, our prison house of fearfully wrong ideas, our chains of materialism, the whole sad and lonely captivity of man without God, his sense of darkness, of the slavery to things, his concentration camps of pleasure. All these our Lord sees that afternoon, and of all these, He says, of all these, my truth, my Father's truth will make you free, free to live with the liberty of the sons of God, the forgiving freedom of the Cross, free to live with the stone rolled away.

Now we can begin to see the essence of a relevant theology for our day. Finally, when all is said and done, we have to see it with His eyes, the eternal eyes for which there is nothing post-Christian, since there can be nothing post-Christ. He calls man forever and forever not to the freedom that man has won, as this passage is so often interpreted, but to the freedom that man has lost, the freedom from the guilt and burden of sin, the freedom to do what God wants him to do, the freedom which came back to man one dark afternoon when He, the Truth, was on the Cross and when there was this brilliant lighting of the gray landscape of history and this final revealing of an almost tangible grace: "I love you! I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have redeemed you, you are mine."

So while our library contains today, and always will contain, some scattered echoes of the logos from Athens and from Sinai and even from Rome, its final relevance for all the ages to come lies in its reflection of Calvary. This theology

is always and forever relevant because it has been made and molded by the scarred hands of Jesus Christ. This and this alone, my brethren, is the way of man to the truth--to see even at this late hour in the time of man all the strange lights that the Logos has strewn throughout history and across the face of the heavens and earth until they all, all of them fuse in the dazzling darkness that is the light of the Cross.

Secondly, if a relevant theology is to be free with the obedience of the Cross, it must by that very obedience maintain a continuing empathy with the agonies of post-modern man. Theologians have been accustomed to say that man is always essentially the same, that without God he is always a sinner and always in need of grace and always running away from God. We all know this afternoon that this is true. But it is also true, brethren, that the world in which he lives changes from age to age, his problems are different, and in certain ages such as our own, so full of shattering bewilderment that man's sin cries more loudly and more pitifully for the healing of heaven. He is still the same man but he is in a darker place and a deeper pain than ever before.

We pause for a moment therefore in this afternoon of the twentieth century and look back to the beginning of the century in which most of us have lived our time. I am sure you will remember that there was no one in the Western World in 1900 who was not sure that this was going to be the greatest century in the history of mankind. We had ^{so}now/conquered the forces of nature, we had done so much by lifting ourselves out of the paths of our fathers, that we could all look forward to a Utopia in the not too far distant future. I do not think that anybody here is so young as not to know that this view of life and history is dead, and dead for many years. As you look back you will see that we had one decade of comparative peace

and progress, one decade of war, one decade of world-wide mad prosperity, one decade of economic collapse, one decade of world war, one decade of cold war, and this decade--just more of the same thing.

Should there not be somebody in the world of universities and seminaries who will now say with clarity and with power, "What in the name of God happened to us? What happened to the world which our fathers and grandfathers knew?" The answer can be framed in various ways. A typical post-modern man who died a few months ago, the late French writer Camus, sums it up this way. "Life is a circumscribed garden entirely surrounded by death--and beyond death nothing." All the time death makes incursions into the garden in all the forms that human death in our time has taken: war; the cruelty of concentration camps; more men, women, and children dead by violence than ever before; innocence abused, and loyalty betrayed; honor lost; failure and defeat and disease. This--is now the vision of life of the post-modern man.

The result is a new type of godless man; not merely the intellectual, philosophical atheist or agnostic whom we have known these many centuries--"the fool hath said in his heart"--but we have now, face to face with us, a man who is actively God-opposed. The German theologians say it well, "Er ist Gottwidrig," a word that best conveys the practical and active character of the post-modern godless man. He is not only willing to have God dead; he wants to have a part in killing Him. He knows well that the living God is the death of his kind of man. I think we should know most clearly this afternoon that this man has never once succumbed to the great and shallow Protestant fallacy that religion is a private affair. He knows very well that God--or no God--touches every area of life, every problem of history, and every segment of society. He knows that the chips are down and that we have now come again to a time of either/or.

This is why it is so necessary for a relevant theology this afternoon to hear again the far and lonely voice, "If ye continue in my word." There is now a desperate and final quality about these words which will probably be clearer to our children than it is to us. We can never forget that almost all the men studying here now will be our pastors and our preachers when the wild bells ring out on New Year's Eve of the year 2000. They--and we--must now face the fact that there will be an ever-rising dramatic crescendo of more and more explicit and ultimate conflict between faith and unfaith, between light and darkness, between wholeness and corruption, which our times make necessary and our God makes possible. "Continue in my Word!" St. Augustine, you may remember, translated that into adhaerere, "Stick to God"--that assent and consent, that search and finding, that conversion and adhesion to the living God, which also goes by the name of faith. We must see once again our own great moment of visitation and say to this world under judgment the words of the original kerygma: "Jesus who was with us is the Lord and He is our Lord and He is with us here in this moment and always,"--the great affirmation in our time and in our condition of the divine presence, the divine mystery, and the divine action.

Now one more word this afternoon. It seems to me that a relevant theology, as seldom before, must be a courageous theology. The freedom of continuing in His Word leaves no room and no time for compromise or cowardice or dark visions of defeat, or--and this we have learned in the Lutheran Church these years--getting minor matters and important matters confused. The Evil One, we have seen through the centuries, seldom makes theologians totally wrong. He is most happy when he sees us become irrelevant. He always attacks from the side, and never head-on. He tells men: "This is what you should be worried about, this is what you should talk about," and when he persuades us that these

minor matters are important, he has won the battle. A modern writer has said that we must now depend in this afternoon of the twentieth century in faith and in hope upon the blessed insomnia of God Himself, "He that keepeth Israel--and us-- shall neither slumber nor sleep." This evening time of the world may well darken down into a blacker night than man has ever known before, but God's cause is safe in God's hands and His work will not tarry for want of men. He buries His workmen but the work goes on. My Savior will neither fall nor be discouraged. Thus and thus alone, my brethren, can we again and once more overcome the scandal and the mystery of a visible church endlessly involved in the weakness of its historic existence, its humanness, its long forgetfulness of the living power of the living God.

We may go on then from victory to victory in the great and glad company of the enthroned saints who have gone before us, who have continued in His Word and have come at last to the great freedom of heaven.

A decade ago I was flying across the Pacific with a very learned Rabbi from Yeshiva University in New York. I spent the long hours listening to him while he told me some of the remarkable rabbinical commentaries on passages in Scripture. One of them I shall never forget. He said that one of the most relevant legends in the rabbinical tradition was the story of Adam on the day that the sun was first created. Adam was standing in the garden watching the sun go down. He had never seen that before. He suddenly felt that all light was going out of his life forever. Standing there afraid and alone, he heard the voice of God coming to him, "Adam, take two stones in your hands and strike them together." And in the gathering darkness Adam took two stones and struck them together. As the sparks flew upward, Adam suddenly realized that his God and his Creator had more than one way of bringing light, and he fell on his knees and uttered the first prayer in the

history of the universe, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord God, King of the universe, who alone art able to bring light out of darkness." Change it this afternoon, if you will, just a little but eternally: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord God, King of the universe--
and now Lord of the Cross--who alone art able to bring light out of darkness."

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